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ABSTRACT

In addition to the typical affective and social challenges faced by most learners with gifts and talents, African American students must negotiate additional challenges emanating from their unique culture. The identification of the social skills and processes utilized by these learners to negotiate their "warring souls" has been unexplored. These identities are: (1) African American in African-rooted culture; (2) African American in mainstream culture; and (3) African American in gifted culture. It has been hypothesized that the challenges facing these students, their families, educators, and this society result from conflicts that emanate from their transcultural experience. A preliminary, qualitative research project was conducted. Focus groups were convened at a small high school in Richmond (Virginia) that serves primarily African American learners with gifts and talents and at a high school in Tampa (Florida) with a student population of 1,880. Students' responses revealed several patterns: (1) students reported rarely feeling that they had to hide their giftedness; (2) students did not feel they had to choose between the identity of African American and gifted; (3) students who were statistical minorities in class expressed frustration with being forced to engage in activities typical of dominant culture youth; and (4) students asserted that adapting their behaviors to different settings was automatic. Given the tensions within and among the settings where these students spend significant amounts of time, it is proposed that culturally-affirming strategies are needed to prevent or reduce the inner turmoil the students experience. (Contains 22 references.) (JLS)

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Three "Warring Souls" of African American High School Students with Gifts and Talents

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Abstract: While the cognitive needs of children with gifts and talents have been well documented in the literature (Stanley, 1980; Sternberg, 1985), the affective and social needs have garnered far less attention (Ford, 1992). It has been hypothesized that the challenges facing these students, their families, educators, and this society result from conflicts that emanate from their transcultural existence (Boykin, 1986). The authors described a qualitative research project with African American high school students with gifts and talents to specifically determine conflicts or tensions relative to their ethnicity, giftedness, and minority status. Additionally, a cultural framework for enhancing these students' social and leadership skill development is proposed.

Introduction

While the cognitive needs of children with gifts and talents have been well documented in the literature (Stanley, 1980; Sternberg, 1985), their affective and social needs have garnered far less attention (Ford, 1992). In addition to typical affective and social challenges faced by most learners with gifts and talents, African American youth manifesting similar gifts and talents must negotiate additional challenges emanating from their unique culture. Accordingly, research and scholarship have rarely focused on these learners' affective, social, and psychological development (Ford-Harris, Schuerger, & Harris, 1991).

Despite myriad social conflicts and dilemmas unique to African American children with gifts and talents, few social development interventions use culture as a mediator in facilitating social and leadership skill acquisition in school, home, and community settings. Many social and leadership skill instructional approaches continue to employ traditional, European-oriented instructional methods. Conventional pedagogical approaches to social and leadership skill instruction are neither affirming of African American children's cultural and ethnic identities, nor responsive to the social conflicts experienced by those children with academic gifts and talents as they interact with dominant and African American cultures in home, school, and community settings.

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It has been hypothesized that the challenges facing these students, their families, educators, and this society result from conflicts that emanate from their transcultural existence (Boykin, 1986). Boykin provided a framework that incorporated social structure and cultural factors for understanding the biculturality and cultural patterning associated with African Americans. Building on the earlier works of Dubois (1961), Prager (1982), and Jones (1972), Boykin purported that African Americans are required to make social, political, emotional and education transactions simultaneously in both mainstream and African rooted culture, a culture that is generally marginalized in American society. Further, it is the authors' belief that African American learners with gifts and talents must also negotiate a third stream of existence--the culture of giftedness.

The nature and extent to which African American students with gifts and talents experience cultural conflicts relative to acting and behaving in their own culture in relation to the values, beliefs, and norms of the mainstream culture have not been systematically explored. Also, relatively unexplored is the identification of the social skills and processes utilized by these learners to negotiate their "three warring souls, " (i.e., African American in African-rooted culture; African American in mainstream culture, African American in gifted culture).

There is a question as to how these three "warring souls" are reconciled by young African American learners with gifts and talents. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to a) discuss African American children 's social and cultural conflicts and tensions which may result from their ethnic identity and giftedness, b) present preliminary focus group data results obtained from African American high school students with gifts and talents, and to c) propose a culturally-affirming conceptual framework for enhancing social development among African American children with gifts and talents.

Social and Cultural Conflicts and Tensions

In addition to the cognitive demands associated with their gifted status, African American learners with gifts and talents, like their majority culture peers, must also

contend with psychological, social and emotional pressures associated with the "gifted" label. Researchers have identified psychological, emotional and social needs of learners with gifts and talents which often go unmet (Buescher 1985; Betts 1986; Piechowski, 1986; Whitmore, 1980). Those individuals reported that children and youth with gifts and talents tend to have 1) intense and sometimes extreme feelings, 2) high levels of fear and anxieties, and 3) feelings of alienation, non-acceptance and disconnection to others. Relatedly, Dirkes (1985) and Betts (1986) reported self-esteem and self-image challenges of gifted learners as a group. Specific to our purpose, Shade (1978) suggested that African American learners with gifts and talents exhibit behaviors that are cautious, controlled, less trusting, and constricting in their approach to others and their environment.

Ford (1992) suggested the need to consider distinct social factors unique to the African American experience when considering the social, emotional and psychological development of these learners. It has been argued that the impact of such factors as racism, discrimination, prejudice, and low socioeconomic status surely must be differentially felt by African American learners with gifts and talents and, accordingly, impact on their development (Patton & Baytops, 1995). Additionally, the total development of African American learners is influenced by cultural factors manifested in deep surface cultural expressions, as well as racial identity variables (Boykin, 1986; Ford, 1992; Fordham, 1988, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Stated differently, the influence of African American cultural integrity, racial identity, and associated aspects, such as spirituality, verve, communalism, expressive individualism, oral tradition, and social time perspective, has been neglected or underestimated in understanding the social, emotional and psychological development of African American learners with gifts and talents. Some have argued that African Americans with gifts and talents encounter more identity problems than members of other ethnic groups (Lindstrom and San Vant, 1986 & Herr & Watanabe, 1979) and experience

inordinate ambivalence, affective dissonance and social pressures in regard to academic effort and success as a function of their race (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) postulated that in response to racism, prejudice, and subordination, African Americans have developed an oppositional social identity and cultural frame of reference which, consciously and unconsciously, has caused them to associate orientations, attitudes, and behaviors (i.e., academic striving, speaking standard English, getting good grades, working hard in school, and generally striving for academic excellence) as betraying the parent African American culture and, therefore, "acting white". These "acting white" behaviors reflect a level of Black identity development that Cross (1980) would identify as the pre-encounter stage, in which one views the world from a White frame of reference. These researchers and others have suggested that many potentially gifted African American learners develop an anti-achievement ethic and engage in behaviors that sabotage or hide their real academic talents, for to do otherwise would be an acceptance of a white cultural frame of reference.

Individuals, then, who engage in academic-oriented behaviors are often called, "nerds" or "brainiacs" by their same-ethnicty peers. This analogy fosters the notion that one can not be gifted and African American at the same time. The question then can be asked, can truly gifted African American learners engage in the previously identified academic striving and success oriented behaviors and be "Black" or African American at the same time? Can academic striving and success be associated with an African American cultural orientation? Fordham (1988) proposed that many high-achieving African American learners adopt a "racelessness' persona in order to cope with tensions that arise from conflicts associated with "being Black and gifted." The "racelessness" persona in her view causes them to adopt characteristics some associate with the dominant culture (i.e., speaking standard American English, working hard academically, wanting good grades, and studying intensely). In her mind, and the minds of others (i.e, Chimezie, 1985; Hare, 1965; & Petroni, 1970), engaging in academic striving behaviors

represents a rejection of African American culture, thus creating constant social, emotional and psychological conflicts within African American learners with gifts and talents.

Focus Group Data Results

A preliminary, qualitative research project was conducted to further identify cultural and social tensions of African American students relative to their ethnicity and advanced academic ability. The authors facilitated a total of nine focus groups between the two sites. Four to five students composed each focus group, that lasted from sixty to ninety minutes. Three focus groups were conducted at a high school in Richmond, Virginia which serves primarily African American (72.5%) learners with gifts and talents and has a total student population of 193. African American teachers comprised 36% of the teaching faculty. Forty percent of the student population qualified during that school year for free or reduced lunch. At that school, eight males and seven females participated who were enrolled as either sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

Six focus groups were conducted at a high school in Tampa, Florida with a student population of 1,880. Thirty-nine percent of the students at the school were African American. Fifty-eight percent of the students enrolled in the school qualified for free or reduced lunch. A total of twenty-eight students (19 females and 9 males) participated in the focus groups .

The school counselors identified the students who participated by using the following criteria: African American students enrolled in any advanced ability program or classes (i.e., gifted, honors, advanced placement, International Baccalaureate or other), and willing to participate. Subsequent to obtaining parent permission, the groups, held in a conference room in the school, were both audio and videotaped to ensure accuracy of information.

A protocol, or questioning route, was developed specifically for this project. It contained seven key questions with more specific probes. Examples include:

How do you feel about the "Gifted" term/label/category?

Probes:
How do adults/peers (in school, home, community settings) perceive you?
How do you feel about your "giftedness" when you're around your black friends?
How do you feel about your "giftedness" when you're around your black friends?
Do you ever feel like "hiding"/"flaunting" your "giftedness"?

Students' responses were summarized and several patterns or emergent themes were identified. Namely, students rarely reported feeling as if they had to hide their giftedness. When they did, they made a point of differentiating that those feelings occurred when they were younger, either in elementary or junior high school. They frequently spoke of flaunting their giftedness mostly with dominant culture adults and peers. The students reported feeling good about being able to prove that they are as intelligent as European Americans. When they flaunted their giftedness around other African Americans, they characterized it as just "playing" with them.

When asked if they felt they had to choose identities between being African American and being "gifted, many students emphatically stated that they did not. They tended to suggest that they are both African American and gifted, and people would have to accept them as both. However, upon further probing, they related many instances where other African American students teased them about being "smart" and how that bothered them. Repeatedly, students discussed the demands and expectations that accompany being in advanced classes. Essentially, the students who were statistical minorities in their advanced classes, expressed frustration with being forced to engage in activities typical of dominant culture youth. They attributed those frustrations to having to spend so much time in classroom environments predominated by dominant culture teachers and students. The examples they gave included differing language, behaviors, music and movie preferences. The students in the school in which they were clearly in the majority, appeared to be readily accepted by other African American students, as most of the students there were African Americans with advanced abilities.

When asked about using behaviors in school that differed from those used at home most of the students admitted using distinctly different behaviors. They asserted that adapting their behaviors to the settings and individuals in those settings was automatic. When asked if that is something that students learn to do, one student stated, " I think that's why they call us gifted. We are able to change. It is common sense to us when to other people, it is a skill. We've figured it out over a period of time. We know that if you're in class and start talking slang, your teacher is going to be like, "What?" So, you have to change. And we know that if we talk to our friends and say, "Hi", they're going to be like, "What?" so we have to change that too."

Largely, summaries of the data reveal that these students do experience social and cultural tensions related to their existence as African Americans, ethnic minorities in mainstream society, and students with gifts and talents. Critically, teachers and counselors must be aware of these students' conflicts and develop and implement culturally-mediated social development enhancement strategies. Given the tensions occurring within and among the settings in which African American students with gifts and talents spend significant amounts of time, culturally-affirming strategies are needed to prevent or reduce the inner turmoil experienced by these students.

A culturally Affirming conceptual framework

There is another perspective and theoretical approach to view these matters, these conflicts, and their resolutions. It could be argued that these generic behaviors associated academic striving, performance and outcomes on the part of contemporary African Americans represent those same behaviors utilized, manifested and cherished traditionally by ancient Africans in Africa and Africans in the Diaspora.

The authors are reminded of two quotations that epitomize an historical, deep rooted and strong set of values, beliefs, and African and African American cultural norms- and orientations associated with academic effort, success, and outcomes. Africanus (1600) professed:

> There are numerous judges, doctors and clerics, all receiving good salaries from the king. He pays great respect to men of learning. There is a big demand for books in manuscript, imported from Barbary. More profit is made from the book trade than from any other line of business. (1). 156)

Relatedly, Bethune (1941) proclaimed:

> In those days (the 1870's and 1880's) it was almost impossible for a negro child, especially in the south, to get an education. There were hundreds of square miles, sometimes entire states, without a single Negro school, and colored children were not allowed in public schools and colored children were not allowed in public school with white children..The whole world opened to me when I learned to read my sense of inferiority. My fear of handicaps dropped away. (p. 49)

It is axiomatic that people of African descent have long, and rich histories and heritage of achievement orientations that result from cognitive and academic prowess. In fact, progressing one's knowledge and functioning levels has been a valued tradition with people of African descent from classical to contemporary times. Excellence in reading, writing, and other skill areas has been historically equated with freedom.

The authors would argue that the tensions surrounding the previously described three "warring souls" metaphor could more accurately be viewed from a conceptual background and framework that acknowledges this rich tradition and heritage of academic- striving and work ethic. The descriptors commonly associated with the giftedness construct can also be associated with one's African American or Black ethnic identity, thus eliminating much of the dissonance and tensions previously reported. In fact, we would argue that being Black or African American presupposes and requires behaviors reflective of academic success, studying hard, and desiring good grades.

It is, after all, this frame of reference that has endured people of African descent through Africa, the Middle Passage; the Caribbean Islands; South and Central America; the shores of America; slavery; Jim Crow; segregation; and contemporary de-segregation. Throughout it all, the association of academic striving, academic excellence, academic merit work were important elements associated with being African and later African American. For these students, it is imperative that African and African American history and traditions be infused throughout social and leadership skill instruction.

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